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AUTHOR Sedlacek, William E.; Kim, Sue H.
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ABSTRACT

More valid assessments for multicultural populations would help counseling professionals better serve their clients and improve the lives of many people whose backgrounds and experiences may differ from those of White clients. Four common misuses of multicultural contexts are: (1) assuming that labeling something solves the problem; (2) using measures normed on White populations to assess non-White people; (3) ignoring the cultural assumptions that go into the creation of assessment devices; and (4) not considering the implications of the use of measures with clients from various racial and cultural groups. Some suggestions for improving multicultural assessments are: (1) concentrate on empirical and operational definitions of groups, not just labels; (2) identify measures specifically designed for multicultural groups; (3) encourage the consideration of cultural factors in the earliest conceptual stages of instrument development; and (4) increase opportunities for an exchange of information between those with quantitative training in instrument development and those with an interest and expertise in multicultural issues. Research on the validity and reliability of measures for specific multicultural groups is needed. (JBJ)

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Multicultural Assessment

William E. Sedlacek and Sue H. Kim

Overview

Assessment includes the use of various techniques to make an evaluation; multicultural assessment refers to the cultural context in which the assessment is conducted, namely one in which people of differing cultures interact. One can argue that all assessments are conducted and interpreted within some cultural context, but only recently have the cultural assumptions underlying such assessments been acknowledged (Sue & Sue, 1990). The fields of counseling and therapy traditionally have relied heavily upon the use of assessment techniques to gather information about clients in order to indicate appropriate directions for treatment. Measures to assess personality, cognitive abilities, interests, and other psychological constructs have been utilized in a variety of different counseling and education settings. Although many of the measures most widely used have established reliability and validity only within White racial samples, these measures often are used inappropriately and unethically with populations from different cultures.

This digest identifies four common misuses of assessments in multicultural contexts, describes some of the ways in which multicultural assessments can be improved, and suggests topics for future research in the area of multicultural assessment.

Common Misuses of Assessments in Multicultural Contexts

1. *Assuming that labeling something solves the problem.* Sedlacek (in press, a) has called this the "Quest for the Golden Label" problem. Using new terms (e.g., multicultural, diversity) does not mean we are doing anything operationally different with our measures. Westbrook and Sedlacek (1991) found that although labels for nontraditional populations had changed over forty years, the groups being discussed were still those without power who were being discriminated against in the system.

2. *Using measures normed on White populations to assess non-White people.* Sedlacek (in press, a) discussed what he called the "Three Musketeers" problem, namely that developing a single measure with equal validity for all is often the goal of test developers. However, if different peoplehave different cultural and racial experiences and present their abilities differently, it is unlikely that a single measure could be developed that would work equally well for all.

3. *Ignoring the cultural assumptions that go into the creation of assessment devices.* Helms (1992) argued that cognitive ability measures are commonly developed from an unacknowledged Eurocentric perspective. Until there is more thought given to the context in which tests are developed, work comparing different racial and cultural groups using those measures will be spurious.

4. *Not considering the implications of the use of measures with clients from various racial and cultural groups.* Professionals may not be adequately trained in determining which measures are appropriate to use with particular clients or groups. Sedlacek (in press, a) has called this the "I'm OK, you're not" problem in that very few professionals receive adequate training in both instrument development and an appreciation of multicultural issues.

Suggestions for Improving Multicultural Assessments

1. *Concentrate on empirical and operational definitions of groups, not just labels.* Sedlacek (in press, b) has suggested that if members of a group receive prejudice and present their abilities in nontraditional ways, they can be considered "multicultural." He suggested the use of measures of racial attitudes and noncognitive variables in making this determination.

2. *Identify measures specifically designed for multicultural groups.* Sabnani and Ponterotto (1992) provided a critique of "racial/ethnic minority-specific" instruments and made recommendations for their use in different assessment contexts. Prediger (1993), in a compilation of multicultural assessment standards for counselors developed for the American Counseling Association, recommended that a determination be made that the assessment instrument was designed for use with a particular population before it is used.

3. *Encourage the consideration of cultural factors in the earliest conceptual stages of instrument development.* Helms (1992) called this a "culturalist perspective" in assessment. Sedlacek (in press, a) noted a lack of developmental multicultural thinking as new instruments are developed. Multiculturalgroups are usually "throw ins" after the fact to see how their test results compare with those of the population on which the test was normed. He called this

the "Horizontal Research" problem in developing assessment measures.

4. *Increase opportunities for an exchange of information between those with quantitative training in instrument development and those with an interest and expertise in multicultural issues.* Currently there is little overlap in these two groups. Helms (1992) felt it was important not to assume that there are enough professionals of color to do this work. Many individuals from majority racial and cultural groups will need to develop such measures as well. Conventions, workshops, coauthored articles, and curricular reform in graduate programs are but a few examples of what could be done.

Topics for Future Research on Multicultural Assessment

Research on the validity and reliability of measures for specific multicultural groups is needed (Helms, 1992; Sabnani & Ponterotto, 1992). This includes studies of attributes that may be more important for multicultural groups than for others. Noncognitive variables, such as handling racism or having support of a cultural or racial group, have been shown to be particularly useful for members of nontraditional groups and should be studied further. Additional research on the utility of defining nontraditional groups broadly to include diversity based on age, physical disability, sexual orientation, etc. (Sedlacek, in press, a), or to concentrate on the major racial and cultural groups, e.g., African Americans, American Indians, Asian Americans, and Hispanics; (Sue, Arredondo, & McDavis, 1992) should be conducted.

Summary

More valid assessments for multicultural populations would help counseling professionals better serve their clients and improve the lives of many people whose backgrounds and experiences may differ from those of White clients. Four common misuses of assessments in multicultural contexts were presented here, as were ways to counteract those misuses. Concentrating on empirical and operational definitions of multicultural groups rather than relabeling was the first suggestion discussed. Using measures specifically designed for multicultural groups was recommended as the best solution to the problem of using instruments normed on White populations. Developing new measures from a "culturalist perspective" was the recommended way to counter a lack of multicultural thinking in instrument development. Creating more opportunities to bring together those with training in instrument development and those with multicultural interests was seen as a way to improve the quality of multicultural assessments by professionals.

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William E. Sedlacek, Ph.D., is Professor of Education and Assistant Director, Counseling Center, University of Maryland at College Park.

Sue H. Kim, M.Ed., is Research Assistant, Counseling Center, University of Maryland at College Park.

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